



## DROWNING BY NUMBERS

Directed by Peter Greenaway  
(1988) Severin Films 4K/Blu-ray

Writer-director Peter Greenaway's films are at bottom abstract intellectual conceits given an often rapturous audiovisual presentation by virtue of his continuing collaborations with top-shelf film craftsmen, especially cinematographer Sacha Vierny and composer Michael Nyman, both of whom worked on this film. Coming off a string of sardonic mood pieces like *A Zed and Two Noughts* and *The Belly of an Architect*, *Drowning by Numbers* is easily one of Greenaway's funniest and most accessible films. It certainly doesn't hurt matters that the film is agreeably leavened with bracing wit, sly irreverence, and a penchant for playfulness that extends beyond its central obsession with gamesmanship.

At the most basic level, Greenaway's story concerns three women, all named Cissie Colpitts, a grandmother (Joan Plowright), her daughter (Juliet Stevenson), and her niece (Joely Richardson). Over the course of the film, the women respectively become disillusioned with their husbands, for a variety of reasons, and resort to dispensing with them through drowning. Each time, they call upon the services of the local coroner, Madgett (Bernard Hill), who agrees to cover up the suspicious nature of the deaths in exchange for the promise of sexual recompense, which is ultimately never followed through upon.

The film's underlying three-part structure parallels the folktale of "The Billy Goats Gruff," which is name-checked near the finale: There are three drownings, three coroner's inquests, three funerals, and three attempted seductions by Madgett. Certain rustic imagery (bonfires, pitchforks) seems to suggest that these three women represent the tripartite aspects of the witch: crone, matron, maiden. Or perhaps they personify the three mythological Fates who spin, weave, and sever the threads of an individual's lifeline. Their predilection for measuring out the lifespans of their men folk certainly indicates more than a passing resemblance.

Another principal theme of the film concerns impotence. For one thing, none of the husbands can swim, so that water, the primordial stuff of life, renders them helpless and causes their deaths. At another level, Madgett's ten-year-old son, the wonderfully named Smut (Jason Edwards), becomes obsessed with the biblical story of Samson and Delilah, wherein Delilah cutting Samson's hair deprives him of his formidable prowess. Smut takes this symbolic castration literally when he attempts to circumcise himself with scissors.

As far as the boy's peculiar name goes, Greenaway seems to have decided on it simply to set up a gag where the middle Cissie reproves Madgett, after he's been accused of possessing pornographic images of his son, with the punning admonition "Smut'll get you in the end!" Nor is kiddie porn the only sordid form of sexuality the film touches upon. Madgett confesses to the middle Cissie that he may have indulged in a kind of necrophilia once or twice in the course of his professional duties, and Smut's delight in celebrating the discovery of dead animals suggests a similar proclivity may be in the making.

Game playing recurs throughout the film at every level. Periodically, Smut lays out the abstruse rules of games with unusual names like *Bees in the Trees*, *Dawn Card Castles*, and *Deadman's Catch*. A young girl (Natalie Morse), on whom Smut develops a pubescent crush, spends her time skipping rope and counting stars. When the elder Cissie asks her why she only counts to 100, she says, "After you've got to 100, all the other hundreds are the same." This is Greenaway's sly wink at a game he's playing with the viewer throughout the film, hiding in plain sight the numbers 1 to 100, which they can try and spot if they so choose.

In spite of its often humorous tone, *Drowning by Numbers* heads inexorably, as do most of Greenaway's films, toward a tragic denouement. Madgett talks about good and evil being in literal contest for the final game he devises, a tug of war to decide whether he'll turn informer on the three women. For its part, the film maintains a moral ambivalence about assigning these qualities, and it certainly doesn't end with good rewarded and evil punished. In a somber yet visually resplendent finale, games and stories coincide, closing on a shot of the number 100.

This new 4K restoration, supervised by the filmmaker, was made from the original camera negative. The transfer looks absolutely ravishing, doing full justice to Sacha Vierny's superlative cinematography. Colors are vibrant; black levels in the frequent nighttime scenes are deep and uncrushed; and grain fields are well-maintained. The Master Audio 2.0 sounds impressively full bodied, providing some oomph for frequent sound effects like fireworks exploding, and admirably conveying Michael Nyman's haunting, minimalist score.

Severin provides a satisfying array of extras. The commentary from writer-director Peter Greenaway (recorded in 2022) covers a lot of ground, touching on everything from Smut's status as a stand-in for his ten-year-old self, and the film's thematic preoccupations, to the specific art and artists that inspired the film's many painterly tableaux. A separate video interview with Greenaway (shot during last year's film retrospective at L.A.'s Aero Theater) allows the director to hold forth on the nature of the film medium, its relation to "40,000 years of painting," the obsolescence of the movie theater, and, on a personal level, his preoccupation with death.

In "Three Women and a Coroner," actor Bernard Hill recalls his excitement at participating in a Greenaway film, the director's unconventional approach to blocking scenes, and how the finished film went over with both English critics and audiences. From 1988, "Fear of Drowning" is a detailed visual essay by Greenaway that thoroughly covers most of the film's themes and intellectual conceits. Finally, "Some Greenaway Game Concepts" are hand-drawn storyboards for various characters and game play.

Budd Wilkins

## THE BEAST IN SPACE

Directed by Alfonso Brescia (as Al Bradley)  
(1980) Vinegar Syndrome Blu-ray



In 1974, Polish iconoclast Walerian Borowczyk repurposed some short footage previously shot for the erotic portmanteau *Immoral Tales* and fleshed it out to create *The Beast*, a perverse fairytale notorious for its creatively faked sequences of zoophilia. Starring Sirpa Lane as an enigmatic, beautiful maiden captivated by a hairy animal, there's not much left to the imagination—with an erect, ejaculating "beast" penis on display. Still, Borowczyk was an

artist, so the gauzy, dreamlike tale comes across as art-house hypnotic rather than disgustingly obscene. I bring this up if only so that Sirpa Lane will be in your head—a former high fashion model and actor for Roger Vadim, no stranger to performing erotically on screen. At any rate, Borowczyk's *The Beast* was released in 1975, premiering at the Avoriaz International Fantastic Film Fest in France.

Further along the timeline, in 1977, 20th Century Fox had a massive success with *Star Wars*. Italian shlockmeister Alfonso Brescia (billed as "Al Bradley") cranks out many cheapie knock-offs with a wild mismatch of science fiction gobbledygook—cheesy costumes with badges out of *Star Trek* and flimsy sets recycled for each release. Really, it's as if Brescia studied the cantina scene in the original *Star Wars*, elements of *Buck Rogers* (the TV Version with Gil Gerard), and *Battlestar Galactica* and decided to make entire feature-length versions with not even a quarter of the budget. The *Star Wars* series—which, to my knowledge, have not been released by any boutique home video labels as of 2023—come and go, make their money, and disappear when the trend ends.

For the last one, however, Brescia uncannily decides to hire Sirpa Lane as the blonde heroine picked up in a cantina by a federation spaceship. She tags along for a mission to search for some mineral (does it really matter?), and somehow, they land on a mysterious planet. On this planet, the band of intrepid explorers, including Captain (Vassili Karis), grow incredibly horny, rubbing up against almost everything and everyone. Lane - as Sondra—begins to fantasize about a creature—a beast, if you will; it culminates in her having intercourse with yet another man-beast, trading on that earlier success.

Co-starring Marina Hedman, Venantino Venantini with the Beast played by Claudio Undari (aka Robert Hundar), his face being so memorable if you've seen *Cut-Throats Nine*.

There are several interviews with the male actors, released by Vinegar Syndrome under their Peekarama line—it's technically a porno due to the xxx hardcore inserts. "Space Amnesia" interviews Karis, who calls the film "a turd" in the opening seconds. It runs for ten minutes. "Space Lover" showcases Lucio Rosato, who seems in good spirits; it runs for 22 minutes. Rosato co-stars with Burt Reynolds in *Navajo Joe* (1966), and thankfully this is touched upon. Meanwhile, "Space Oddity" captures Venantino Venantini (Ladyhawk), but the audio isn't the strongest. Still, Venantini has since passed, so it's good to have a record of a forgotten actor on a forgotten project.

Miraculously, the original negative was purchased at a Rome bankruptcy auction. No film should be lost, no matter how terrible *The Beast in Space* turns out to be. And as a time capsule to when intergalactic knock-offs were the order of the day, you could do worse.

Sirpa Lane didn't have any more cinematic encounters with hairy beasts throughout the rest of her shortened film career. There would only be three more projects, the highest profile being Roberto Bianchi Montero's *Le not segrete di Lucrezia Borgia* (1982), set in the 1500s and trading in the same sort of vaguely aristocratically erotica that Lane made a name with. In *The Beast in Space*, she's the draw (and not even due to the highly loose Borowczyk connection); she's morose, mysterious but alluring. It's a nothing role, but Lane succeeds with a unique presence alone. Lane would retire in the 1980s, contract HIV by the end of the decade, and pass away shortly before her 53rd birthday in 1999 on the Spanish island of Formentera.

Aaron Graham